

IN THE GAME

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In The Game B1

The Bruins get back to their postseason roots



Photo by Brody Hilgenkamp

BU coach Duane Monlux (right) led the Bruins to the NAIA World Series to earn coach of the year honors.

Monlux earns ITG honor by guiding Bruins back to World Series

By Kevin Houck
Sports Editor

The Bellevue baseball team surged this season to advance to the Avista-NAIA World Series for the second time since 2016. The Bruins won the North Star Athletic Conference before winning the conference tournament and the NAIA Opening Round to advance to the final postseason stage. The accomplishments earned Bruin head coach Duane Monlux the honor of ITG Coach of the Year.

"He has a real passion for the game," Bellevue University Athletic Director Ed Lehotak said. "He's somebody who really cares about his student athletes and he's a student of the game."

"He's confident, but he's not cocky. Sometimes we joke with him, too. He'll say, 'We're never going to win another game.' Well, they win a lot of games."

Monlux wrapped up his ninth season as the head coach. Assistant coaches Mitch Schmidt and Shawn Malley were retained from the previous staff, and Schmidt said Monlux made it a family environment from his first day.

"You want to work with somebody that's not only a good baseball guy, but also a great person," Schmidt said. "Both (coach Malley) and I, we have families. The first thing right away was we were going to do this together as a family."

Our first meeting with all of us was on New Year's Eve. The kids got together and played together and even to this day, my family, coach Malley's fam-

ily and Duane's family, they all come together at the games and play."

The 2019 season didn't quite start the way it finished, though. The Bruins sat in a Florida hotel during the Warner Invitational with a 5-12 record. After a 6-0 win and with a game against No. 10 St. Thomas the next day, the Bruins called a team meeting. During the meeting, JT Patterson and Riley Baasch coined the phrase "Confident but not cocky," and the rest is history.

The Bruins went on to beat St. Thomas and then finish in fourth place in the tournament. The invite was the last of 20-straight road games to open the season with 12 being against a ranked opponent. Bellevue came back to Nebraska with a 7-13 record, slated to start conference play.

"He was a little disappointed when he came back and they were only 7-13, but they weren't getting blown out. He said they were going to take it a game at a time and they did," Lehotak said.

The Bruins went on to win 39 of 40 games, including a 26-game win streak, the rest of the season.

"If you look at our schedule, we knew it was going to be tough," Schmidt said. "We had to help each other through it. Being a good a family, there was guys who didn't have good at-bats and guys who didn't pitch well. We had to pick them up knowing we were a good team. We just had to support each other through thick and thin."

It was an incredible turnaround for the baseball team,

Schmidt said, especially considering the other obligations of the coaching staff.

"Obviously, we didn't imagine that happening," he said. "We thought we would have a few losses sprinkled in, but the guys bought in. We just got to sit back and enjoy the game that we love. We're a NAIA school. We're not getting paid a lot of money to do what we do. All three of us that are full-time coaches have another job on campus. Duane has classes to teach, I work in the student financial services and Malley is the events coordinator. We all work around each other and the players see we give up a lot on the personal side. That's where I think the bonds come from. They see the coaches giving something up, so let's work a little harder."

In conference play, the Bruins finished with a 23-1 record to enter the NSAA conference tournament in North Dakota as the top seed. Despite only playing five games at their actual home field and playing the other seven at Bellevue East and Bellevue West because of the weather, the Bruins finished a perfect 12-0 at home. They finished 19-9 on the road and 17-7 at neutral sites. The road and neutral games included the first 20 of the season, and the Bruins only lost one game on the road during the 39-win stretch, which led to a few surreal moments.

"At one point when we were on the road coach Malley said, 'Duane pinch me,'" Schmidt said. "We're all brothers. I kind of hang and push buttons a little

bit. Duane is the optimistic guy and Shawn is the very confident guy. We work well together and we each put our piece in. At the end of the day, we would sit there and say, 'This is going to be really fun.'"

After winning the conference tournament, the Bruins traveled to Shreveport, La., for the NAIA Opening Round and another moment occurred as they were getting off the bus. The Bruins played "Raise A Little Hell" by Trooper, which became their new slogan.

"When we were down in Louisiana the first day, guys were getting off the bus and a couple of guys were dancing and singing a little bit," Schmidt said. "Then we popped it on the aux cord and raised a little hell. No one expected us to win this, so lets go raise a little hell."

The Bruins rode the song and won the Shreveport regional to advance to the World Series.

"Then after we won (the opening round), the guys were dancing on the bus to it," Schmidt said.

The Bruins carried the song to Lewistown, Idaho, in the opening round of the World Series against Indiana Tech.

"When we went to Lewistown, we played the 8:30 a.m. game," Schmidt said. "I'm sure the people in the dorms weren't happy because the first day at 6:30 in the morning, we had six vehicles that pulled up in the parking lot that opened the doors and played 'Raise A Little Hell.'"

The Bruins ended up losing a heartbreaker in extra innings to

No. 23 Indiana Tech, but it was what they displayed in adversity that caught the eye of Schmidt.

"As soon as we sat down to eat (after the loss), it was like the guys forgot we played a ballgame," Schmidt said. "Junior outfielder Daniel Teasley said it perfectly."

"He said, 'It's the next pitch mentality. We can't control what already happened, but we can control tomorrow so let go raise a little hell.' The guys all just looked at each other and smiled. That was the thing about this group. Something negative would happen and you'd have two or three guys jumping up (to keep the confidence)."

With their back against the ropes in the double elimination tournament, the Bruins went on to beat No. 3 Faulkner and Lewis-Clark State before falling to No. 4 Georgia Gwinnet to end the season with a 48-16 record.

"After the World Series, we cried a little. When we said our goodbyes in the concourse, we made a big circle and got the guys together. We said, 'There you go. This is our Bruin baseball family. You guys are going to do special things in life,'" Schmidt said.

That's the family mentality Monlux and the Bruins have built to make the Bellevue baseball program a special place to play, Schmidt said.

"We're the Bruin baseball family. It's plain and simple. We're not a baseball team or a baseball program," he said. "We're a Bruin baseball family. That comes all the way back to all the alumni stuff we do."

NOTABLE NUMBERS

03

Homers for Mason

Gretna's Quinn Mason homered in three separate games at the Dakota Classic in South Dakota over the weekend.

04

CWS Teams in Area

Four CWS teams used a pair of area teams schools for practice. Three at Bellevue East and one at Papio South.

22

Teams in BSC Tourney

The Bellevue Soccer Club gathered 22 teams in the first Bob Walters Memorial Invitational June 7-9.

HEADLINES



Basball Recap

The Ralston legion baseball team advanced to the final in the Waverly Tournament over the weekend. B4



ITG Player of the Year

Papillion-La Vista's Conner Barnett's spring baseball season earned him player of the year honor. B2



ITG Coach of the Year

Bellevue University head baseball coach Duane Monlux earns ITG honor after helping Bruins to a 48-16 record. B1